

Are you an alcoholic, coke fiend, codependent, pothead, dope shooter, gambler, debtor, child abuser, agoraphobic, savings and loan victim, prostitute, survivor of suicide attempts or incest, tobacco junkie, overeater, or just an everyday obsessive-compulsive?

Well, your troubles have just begun. No matter what your affliction, there's a Twelve-Step group somewhere waiting to support you, stroke you, validate your feelings, and hug the shit out of you. All of the disorders listed above have engendered Twelve-Step programs and may herald the day when society has sympathy for victims of excessive tire wear, survivors of weak orgasms, and adult children of Rotary Club members.

Alcoholics Anonymous, the original Twelve-Step program, started with three sobered businessmen in 1935 Ohio. That nucleus has exploded, according to A.A. estimates, into eighty-eight thousand groups with two million adherents throughout a hundred and thirty-four countries. That's impressive, but not necessarily a validation: Both the bubonic plague and communism spread similarly. As with chemotherapy, the cure is often as bad as the disease. Twelve-Step programs are widely held as near-sacred and untouchable, so of course

I'm gonna wipe my greasy, bony fingers all over 'em.

I'll admit that I loathe the lingo of pop psychology. If I run across another codependent from a dysfunctional family who's in recovery and is learning to process their issues and nurture the child within, I'll spit in their face. Get your nose out of your ass! Grow the fuck up! Grab a knife and stab the child within! But I feel this way because I'm in denial, right?

Twelve-Step programs have all the earmarks of an organized religion: an inspired group of founders which begat legions of uninspired followers, a main text (the ominously titled "Big Book"), a sacrament (checker-sized plastic chips), and liturgies which are read aloud at each meeting.

The Big Book tells the story of A.A.'s founders and hammers home the program's basic tenets. Paraphrased, the first three steps are: 1) Say that you have no power over your drinking; 2) Place your faith in some ethereal power; and 3) Submit your will to this power. The Big Book systematically debases any notion of individual empowerment and self-control:

Any life run on self-will can hardly be a success... The alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot... The fact is that most



ANSWER Me! **REFUSES TO GET WITH THE PROGRAM**

alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink.... The actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.... They were drinking to overcome a craving beyond their mental control.... You can't win unless you try God's way.... Many alcoholics have concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming "God-consciousness." ... Our ideas did not work. But the God idea did.

In place of communion wafers or the blood of a slain virgin, Twelve-Steppers celebrate their faith with "sobriety chips," which are given to those who've been on the wagon for specified intervals. In the film *Clean and Sober*, Michael Keaton reminisces about his first coke-free month after receiving a thirty-day chip:

I've been to a funeral. I've been to about nine million job interviews. I'm fifty-two thousand dollars in debt. And I got this

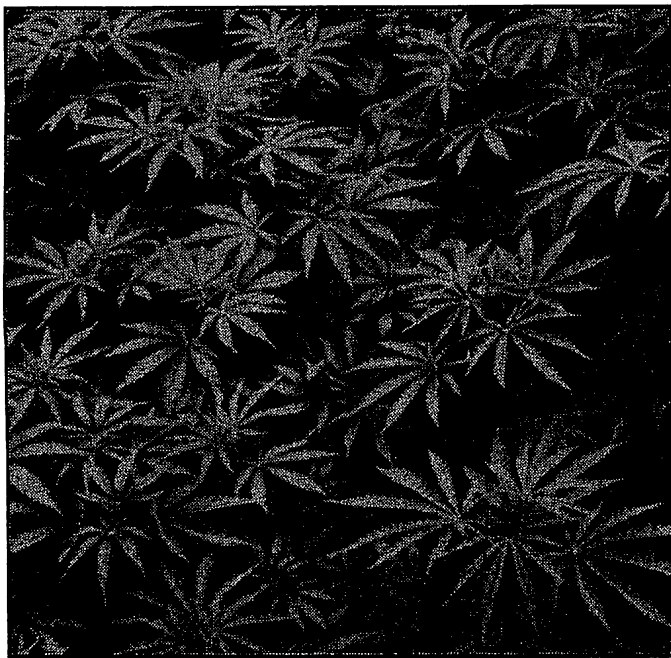
chip. I got this chip [*eyes become misty*], and I've got the startling belief that I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict.

Hmm—in exchange for morbidity, repeated rejection, and fifty-two thousand bucks, I get a lil' plastic chip? How do I sign up?

MEETING #1: REEFER REMORSE

You'll find two things at almost every Twelve-Step meeting: unquestioning acceptance and steel vats of piping-hot coffee. The brown bean's aromatic nectar floats down a dusty church corridor. A cheerfully plump guy hands us styrofoam cups, and my wife and I tap into the dark liquid stimulant.

Slurping the free, legal addiction, we enter a sleepy Sunday-school room. Thick planks of sunshine illuminate dust particles and weather-beaten wooden floors. We sit on steel folding chairs which are



painted the standard dull beige. People mill around, hugging each other, nodding understandingly. It's a mix of sensitive guys and women on the edge of breakdown. Blacks in kufi hats share kind words with generic Caucasoids. It's the only place in L.A. where I've seen something approaching racial harmony, however forced. People who wouldn't make eye contact with me on the street look at me with twinkling expressions that say, "Hi! How ya doin'? Glad ya could make it!" We notice that one woman is staring at us with an open smile. "Are you guys first-timers?" she asks.

Uh, yep. She walks over to where we're sitting and hugs both of us. Yuck. "Keep coming back," she instructs us, skipping back to her seat. FLASH! Déjà vu. These folks remind me of the Jesus freaks from the seventies: hardcore ex-sleazeballs who've found a program of undiluted niceness. I half-expect them to roll their eyes back in their heads and start babbling in tongues. Collective brainwashing predates biblical times.

"Shhh!" whispers the group leader, a pepper-haired graduate of the Phil Donahue school of male submissiveness. "Ready? Welcome to the ——— meeting of Marijuana Anonymous. My name is Sarkis." (ANSWER Me! will substitute Arabic first names throughout the article.)

"HI, SARKIS!" shouts the group in unison.

"Hi. . . Are there any newcomers in the group with less than thirty days of sobriety?" We raise our hands. "If so," Sarkis continues, "will you please stand up and give your names so that we can get to know you better?"

Trembling, my wife stands up. "Hi, my name is Debbie, and I've been free from marijuana for two weeks." (It was actually more like two hours.)

"HI, DEBBIE!" screams the crowd, which

explodes into deafening hysteria, with several solo yelps of joy rising above the din. You'd think Debbie had discovered a cure for cancer.

I stand and kiss her forehead. "My name's Jim, and I'm a marijuana addict."

"HI, JIM!" More shrill applause.

Sarkis resumes reading from a handbook. "The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop using marijuana. There are no dues, no fees for membership. We are fully self-supporting through our own contributions. We

are not aligned with any sect, denomination, or political organization. We do not wish to engage in any controversy with the media. [OOPS!] We choose twelve steps to recovery because it has been proven that the Twelve-Step program works."

A woman is summoned to read from chapter five of the Big Book. "Hi, my name is Suad, and I'm a marijuana addict."

"HI, SUAD!" Clap, clap, clap. After she finishes reading, they clap again.

"Would anyone like to receive a welcome chip?" asks Sarkis, looking directly at us. What the hell? We accept more hugs and two lavender chips. On one side of the key chain-type device is the pyramidal, pseudo-Satanic M.A. logo. On the other side is the frightening command, KEEP COMING BACK. We realize that the crowd is quietly staring at us. Sarkis motions for us to stand and re-introduce ourselves.

"Hi, I'm Jim, and I'm a marijuana addict."

"HI, JIM!" The sound of forty hands clapping.

"Hi, I'm Debbie, and I'm an addict."

"HI, DEBBIE!" More palms slapping together.

"Thirty days?" asks Sarkis. Someone lifts his arm, the crowd applauds, and the thirty-day suckling is given a thirty-day chip. "Hi, my name is Zoroaster, and I'm an addict."

"HI, ZOROASTER!" Applause.

Another guy walks up and takes a chip. "I'm Khalil, and I'm a marijuana addict."

"HI, KHALIL!" Guess what? More applause.

"Uh, sixty days?" asks Sarkis. Someone raises his hand to more hoots and hollers, then walks up to receive the chip.

"I'm Telal, and I'm a marijuana addict, and, uh. . ."

"HI, TELAL! WHEE!"

The leader gives a small inspirational speech, which brings more applause. "Uh, ninety days?"

he asks. Nothing. "Nine months?" A woman raises her hand to awestricken gasps and more clapping. Sarkis bestows upon her the special nine-month chip.

"Hi, I'm Nefertiti, and I'm a pot addict."

"HI, NEFERTITI!"

"I know that I still have a real problem," she says. The crowd loves this statement and gives her a special nine-month round of applause. Sarkis then turns the meeting over to the main speaker.

With gnarled locks of grey hair and bugged-out, worried eyes, the speaker introduces himself. "Hi, my name is Yacub, and I'm an addict."

"HI, YACUB!"

Like almost everyone else in the group, he says he was born in Brooklyn and claims he was an addict from birth. He discovered "grass" in his teens while listening to Hendrix. Is that a cliché or *what*? If you weren't a smoker, he didn't want to know you. He got married, but his wife left him, claiming that he resembled a "walrus with one tusk." (He always had a joint in his mouth.) He spent his vacation every year in Jamaica, mon.

"I was just going further and further into my addiction," he says, "not wanting to believe that I'd fallen into a trap. . . I always thought I'd be smoking dope on a rocking chair when I was ninety years old." He says his brother had been shooting smack for twelve years but kicked it with the help of a recovery program. "Some



huge spiritual change just came over my brother and it was, like, for real. And it was really a fucking miracle." That's another thing about Twelve-Steppers: To lend their testimonies some gritty authenticity, they freely use words such as 'fuck' and 'shit,' just so you know they're not full of fucking shit. Then again, so do I, so what the fuck kind of shit am I talking about?

Yacub reveals that he always felt like he was wearing a green suit in a world of brown-suited people. To escape his feelings of inadequacy, he'd smoke himself "into oblivion." While sitting at home one night "feeling sorry" for himself, he torched a doobsker, nodded out, and awoke to find that his kitchen was on fire. That was the joint which broke the camel's back.

"I found what was really a miracle for me," he says, "was that all I had ever wanted in my whole life was just to feel like I belonged. You know, that I was loved. And when I walked into my first meeting, all I had to do was just say my name, and these people loved me." I know I'd feel good if people loved me for my name and not my attributes. My name's Jim. You love me, don'tcha?

Instead of wantonly toking, Yacub now chats with the Lord. "I just get up in the morning and talk to God and say, 'Hey—I'm your soldier Yacub, you know, employed in your service.'" Other spiritual warriors shake their heads with empathy. "I just think that this program is the best deal in town," Yacub continues. "I mean, for a buck, you get a chance to have some group therapy and a chance to possibly see God." I scan the crowd from end to end but fail to see Him. Maybe God'll attend *next* week.

Yacub relinquishes the floor to Sarkis, who assigns someone to read the "Twelve Traditions" aloud. They're an entirely different deal than the Twelve Steps and end in the admonition that group members should place "principles before personalities." Like zombies, everyone chants these three words as they're read, applauding heartily at the concept of their vanquished individuality.

It's time for sharing. "I keep tasting acid. I keep tasting Quaaludes," says a wizened woman with bleached-blond hair. She says that she's bankrupt. The IRS is on her ass. Her personal relationships are falling to pieces. "My automatic response," she says, "was, 'Go to a meeting, go to a meeting, go to a meeting.' [As you'll see later, they always seem to say it three times.]" Nothing like the cocoon of unreality when your life's fucked.

A woman with a black pompadour and a hawk nose talks about her resistance to group psychology, how she had to fight that impulse and go with the flock. I uncomfortably sense a negative narcissism, that these people enjoy laying guilt on themselves in front of others. She says that she was on a business trip and dodged a few meetings. This caused almost unbearable remorse. "I can't go seven to ten days without a meeting," she confesses. "I was wrong. I had an attitude." Heavens forfend!

Wearing a droopy pink gym suit, one woman's eyes twitch as she nervously rubs her hands together. Her sense of guilt is so strong, it manifests itself in physical symptoms. If you're easily shocked, you might want to stop reading now. Her pancreas-twisting self-hatred is easily understood. It seems that she had become lazy and was attending only *five meetings a week*. She had promised herself and God that she would "double up," i.e., go to *ten meetings per week*. She failed to follow through with her promise. Why, the cold-blooded, black-hearted, self-serving bitch!

After a moment of silent reflection, we all join hands and recite the Our Father. Following "Amen," everyone opens their eyes, clenches their hands tighter, and says, "KEEP COMING BACK, BECAUSE IT WORKS!"

The circle dissolves into loose socializing, with several individuals taking the time to tell us we've chosen the right path. Someone pops her head in the room and begs, "Can you *please* keep it down? There's a meeting going on in the next room."



MEETING #2: SNOW JOB

Another day, another church, another twelve steps to descend. Of all the addicts our wonderful world has to offer, I probably have the least sympathy for coke freaks. I call cocaine the "emperor's new drug," perfect for conformist achievers who can't trust themselves to achieve. Why people would blow their life's savings on a hyperinflated coffee buzz that doesn't alter their minds is beyond me. I don't quite *enjoy* heart murmurs and having my dick drained down to raisinlike proportions.

There are only four others besides us, and they're a tangled mess of frazzled ganglia, tapping their feet, blinking uncontrollably, and squirming in tiny chairs designed for kindergarteners. Their raging neurons are giving me a headache. I feel like strapping everyone down and pouring cold water on them.

Even though there are so few of us, the group leader keeps fucking up everyone's names. A hairy grizzly of a man, he uses the ultimate Twelve-Stepper's excuse: "I guess I haven't had my coffee yet.... Do you feel like leading a meeting?"

He's talking to me. I decline, so he hands me a laminated card and asks that I read from the Big Book's passage on the Twelve Steps, modified to replace 'alcohol' with 'cocaine.'

"Hi, my name is Jim, and I'm an addict."

"HI, JIM!"

HOW IT WORKS

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates.... Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

1. We admitted we were powerless over cocaine—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to

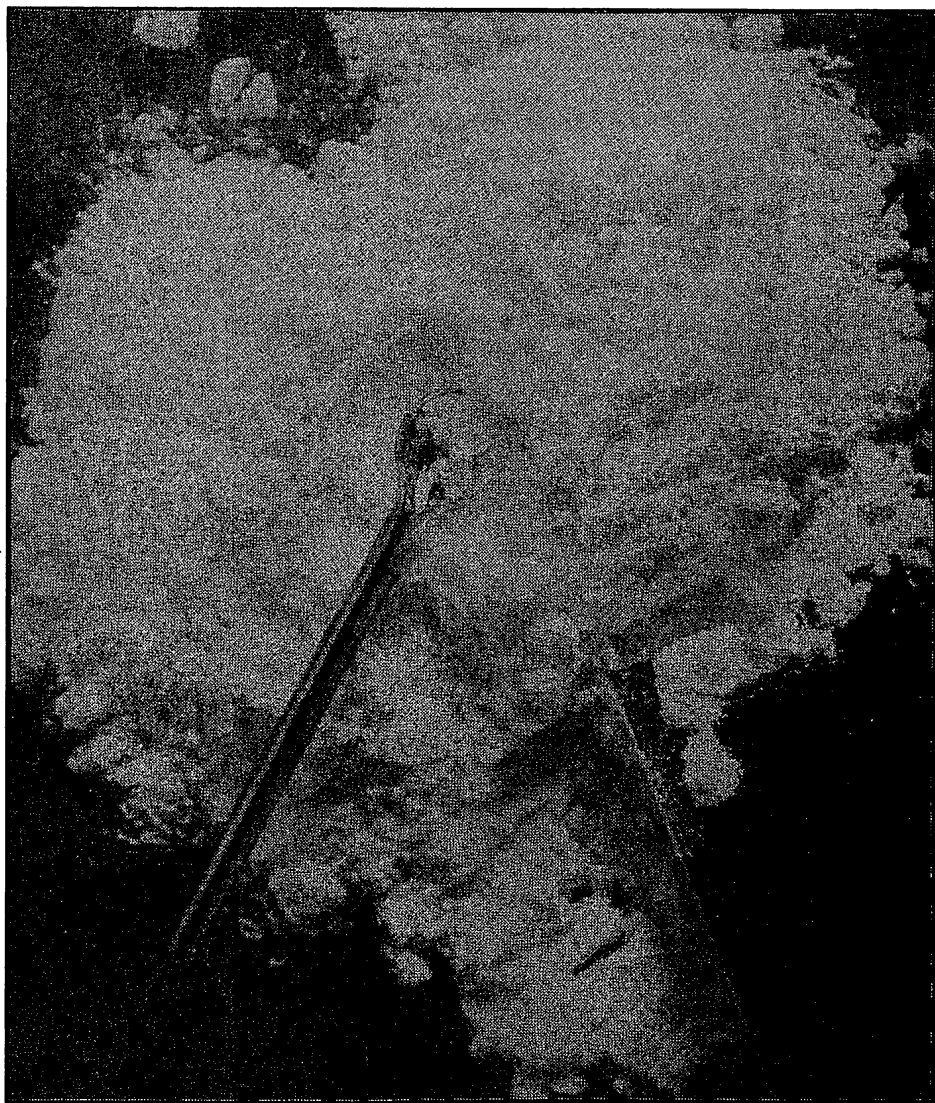
make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to cocaine addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Our leader begins to share a lil' bit of himself with us, his voice assuming the soft, muted tone that people of the psychotherapeutic ilk use to assure you they're not *really* a seething vessel of wretched hostility. He says he's in his mid-thirties, coming out of twenty-one years of addiction. "I'm just a fifteen-year-old scared little kid who needs love," he says. Well, don't look at *me*.

"Ya wake up and ya find yourself doing something fundamentally different than ya've ever done it before," he coos, "and it's all a result of just hanging around here, ya know, and letting recovery happen at the slow pace that it happens." He says he lost his job and is recently divorced, but he remains upbeat. "I went on an interview yesterday, and I didn't give the interviewer the power to hire me, because I had heard a recovery tape that if God is all-knowing and all-loving and all-present, then He has the power. And the only way ya can give somebody else the power is to *give* it to them. If ya know that they don't have the power and that God has the power for all these decisions, then ya just go in there and turn it over. And I did." I wouldn't have hired him just because he listens to recovery tapes.

The next guy to share wears shorts, sandals, and the look of the hunted that comes from prolonged stimulant abuse. He says he's back from a weekend vacation where he drove eleven hours up to California redwood country. "It was kinda nice," he says. "I was all wired up on



coffee. ...I went back to the truck and it was hard for me to sleep, because I was just so sober. I went to some meetings up there. People are very open, and they're very into being sober. They're working their steps."

He's working them, too, stepping all over his ego, kicking it until it's bruised and nearly dead. Everyone in the program seems willing to talk about how horrible they used to be. "I'd smoke pot and do coke, smoke pot and do coke," he recalls, "just switchin' one addiction for another. First it's sex, then it's pot, then it's sex, then it's eating, then it's sex, then it's pot, then it's eating, and all these addictions just keep coming back. Why not just, 'Don't worry, be happy,' and just go on with life?" Sounds good, O thou one of damaged nerves, but why trade your previous addictions for enslavement to coffee and the program?

I'll tell you why. Because people like being slaves. The program

demands that you smother your natural individualistic impulses and become a single cell within a free-floating, unthinking group jellyfish. The Big Book even quotes a neurologist who congratulates A.A. for encouraging the "herd instinct." *ANSWER Me!* believes that creativity never comes from collective thought, whether it be the establishment's consensus or that of the vaunted "counterculture." But most others aren't like us. They gather like lemmings and leap off cliffs in the name of the newest mass deception.

"Being sober is a great thing to be," continues the unwitting Nazi of positivity. "Do the steps, go over the program, come to the meetings. That's the way to be. You wanna control your attitude? Come to the meetings. You wanna learn something about life? Come to meetings. That's what the whole thing's about. You think meetings are stupid? I was two weeks sober before I came into meetings, and that's the whole





thing—I wanted sobriety, and I didn't want my attitude anymore. To control my attitude, I had to come to meetings. The guy I went with on this trip, he's a kid, he's like twenty years old, and he's got sixty days of sobriety. That's all we did—we just sat and talked about sobriety, and we read out of the Big Book. And it was kind of like a Bible study. But the thing is, the Bible tells you how to *work* on life, but the Big Book tells you how to deal with life on life's terms. And if you can relate to dealing with life on life's terms, that's the best way to be." Touché, but if you want to face life head-on, why the FUCK do you need a program, a Big Book, and a higher power?

I don't have time to ask, because the leader enjoins us to form a circle and recite the Our Father, which again ends with the "KEEP COMING BACK!" hand squeeze. The leader waddles up and hugs us with his sweaty bear's body. "People are really loving and open here," he tells us. "You can just go into any meeting anywhere and just be comfortable with it. It's real warm, real magical." *Magical?* I think to myself. *The more a person strains to be sincere, the more full of shit they become.*

Another ex-cokehead hugs us and says he's been to twenty-six meetings in the last fourteen days. He's planning to attend yet another one in a few hours. "I gotta keep going to meetings,

going to meetings, going to meetings," he insists. "The meetings are all we have. The program is all we have."

MEETING #3: OF ALCOHOL AND GUYANESE KOOL-AID

This meeting's a giant alcoholic carnival of nearly two hundred persons. It's midday, but the women are in full makeup and boho club gear, fawning over stubbly guys with Christ-length hair. Buff biker dudes with ponytails charge across the room to hug women in rhinestone glasses and leopard jackets. I smell a meat market, as if all of Melrose Avenue had suddenly entered recovery.

We sit in the back row. Watching the hug-in, I consider how fragile such a conspiracy of belief is—in an instant it could fall apart or congeal into something far more dangerous. I'm sure that back in the seventies, most of those who joined up with Jim Jones and his People's Temple did so for what they thought were positive reasons. After a few years and more than a few lies, they were willfully sipping poisoned Kool-Aid and dropping like bird shit.

"I got to the program because somebody Twelve-Stepped me," says the female speaker,

making her spiritual awakening sound oddly like a physical assault. "I think that's really important, because I would've never gotten here on my own. I didn't have the guts to stop. I would've died before I reached out my hand for someone." She delivers her words in an unwavering pitch reminiscent of the disembodied teacher's voice from Charlie Brown's classroom in *Peanuts*. "I got here," she says, "because there was no place for me to go anywhere else." The crowd chuckles knowingly. "I got out of bed and came to a meeting. It's a spiritual program. It was really important for me to learn that I was gonna have to find something bigger than you guys in this room to take my ass out of booze and drugs. And I decided to turn my life over to Him. I spent a lot of time lying to myself. A lot of time trying to be, you know, what my mom and dad wanted me to be, what my boyfriends wanted me to do, and what society wanted me to do."

Now she's got her shit straight—she's doing what a *higher power she never met* wants her to do. She says she wanted to be a rock star, but those weren't "God's plans" for her. In her drunken days of yore, she had been raped, mugged, and beaten, but now God's teaching her to "take responsibility." This is another thing I find annoying about the Twelve-Stepers: They're eager to guilt-trip about their

malodorous past deeds, even going so far as to blame themselves for things that couldn't have been their fault, such as being raped. But when it comes time to take credit for any *positive* action in their lives—POOF!—they had nuttin' to do with it. Blame the higher power for that one. It seems that their spiritual awakening consists of the realization that they can do nothing but wrong. People are usually so devoid of self-knowledge that when they get a little, they blow it out of proportion and lend it some cosmic significance.

The chip-giving ritual begins, and people respond to the tiny "APPLAUSE" and "HI,—!" signs flashing in their heads. Speeches follow in rapid succession, each a radical thematic departure from the previous one. Consider the diversity of opinion evidenced in the following spiels:

A) I just want everyone out there to keep coming to meetings. I like it a lot. I'm keeping with the program, and every day is one more. I keep coming back to A.A. meetings.

B) I keep going, going, going to meetings.

Isn't it great? The first keeps *coming* to meetings, while the second keeps *going* to meetings, and yet A.A. finds room for *both* of them!

We finally sniff the rarefied air which lies above the many levels of chipdom. A wedding-sized cake is carried out to honor those whose sobriety transcends mere days and months. A list of names is read, accompanied by the number of years it's been since each of them last boozed it up. The crowd joins together in song:

Happy birthday to you/
Happy birthday to you/
Happy birthday, dear A.A./
Happy birthday to you./
Keep com-ing baaaaaack!

Teetotaling celebrants approach the cake one by one. As each is introduced, an organizer lights an appropriate number of candles. The crowd applauds at each introduction, then again after the candles are blown out, and yet again after each person delivers their speech. The birthday boys and girls spout the shopworn slogans about God being in charge and loving the child within, but one statement stands out as an existential nightmare:

"What I did was work within the Twelve Steps. In any situation, we only have twelve choices."

MEETING #4: NARCOLEPSY

I guess heroin's cool if you want to look like Keith Richards or an extra in *Dawn of the Dead*. But in the AIDS era, anyone who bangs dope is a formaldehyde-preserved moron. *ANSWER Me!* believes in doing nothing halfway. Either live your life or end it. Don't stumble around using your wrist for an ashtray or scratching zits off your ass. People actually think that shit's romantic? Plenty of L.A. metalheads do, but it just makes them easier to beat up.

At a stifling, unventilated Narcotics Anonymous meeting, I sense that most of





these folks' brains are still swimming in a narco syrup. They're either stupid or brain-damaged, but it's the only group where people have trouble reading the literature aloud. One simian-faced oaf (let's call him "Anwar") reads an agonizing syllable at a time, stalling on complex words such as 'their,' 'terms,' 'enemy,' and 'methods.' He can't even *pronounce* 'significant' after repeated phoneticization by his cohorts. Another junk casualty reads a section from the Big Book, tripping over the words 'acceptable,' 'protective,' and 'substitute.' I vow that I'll never, *ever* take narcotics.

A ruddy, Kris Kringlish man is the guest speaker. He calls himself an "ex-drunk" who's been sober for thirty years—as long as I've been alive.

I don't know why an alkie is at Narcotics Anonymous, but for some reason I trust him. That is, until he really starts talking.

"We have a common enemy," he says, "one great common enemy, and I'll tell you who it is—the name is 'You.' You are your own worst enemy. Remember—everything that has happened to you in your life, you caused it. Understand it—you cannot blame anybody for using or drinking. You made that decision. Nobody put a goddamned gun to your head and said, 'If you don't shoot this needle in you, we're gonna blow your brains out.' No. You did it because you wanted to. Understand that. You are the one that started your addiction. Nobody else. So don't blame your mother, your father, your wife—no human power made you what

you are today. You did it. Now, how do we solve that problem of 'You?' You have a choice—you can stop at any time you want. Most people have to go through a lot of living hell, all kinds of shit, before we realize and come to a point, 'Either I stop, or I don't stop and I'm gonna kill myself.' All alcoholics at one time or another, or addicts at one time or another, wanted to do away with themselves, because that's the other enemy—you. You hate you. You can't get along with you. Nobody understands you. That's why you fight with you. . . . Ego will kill you." Silly me—here I was, thinking it was the main component of my survival.

The meeting unravels into a discussion of the Twelve Steps that perhaps only a numerologist would find worthwhile. "The only time another human being comes into your existence is step five, and that's the only time," says the sober Santa Claus. "Six and seven—you wanna know something? Three and four is your whole goddamned program. Follow me, if you know this program. After you pass five, five goes back to three. Eight goes back to four. Nine goes back to four. Ten goes back to four. Eleven goes back to three, and twelve goes back to three. There's your program." Yeah, but what if six was nine? Wouldn't you mind?

A woman speaks up. "The Big Book tells me that if the third step is not immediately followed up at once by steps four and five, it has little or no permanent effect. How do you feel about that?"

"Well," answers the overweight cherub, "number three is, once you have found a power greater than yourself, then you have to make a decision to turn your power over. Now, that's strictly you and God. The fourth step then becomes you and you and you. And the fifth one is, like, you and somebody else *and* God. Does that make sense to you?"

Amazingly, it does. "How do you Twelve-Step?" asks another.

"Well, Twelve-Stepping's entirely different to me. I still Twelve-Step," he says. I still do the Mashed Potato, but that's between me and God.

Instead of joining hands and saying the Our Father, we lock arms in a circular hug and recite the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know
the difference. Amen. KEEP COMING BACK! IT WORKS IF YOU
WORK IT! YEAH!!!

There's a final announcement from Anwar, the *Sesame Street*-level reader, as the group disperses. "Hi, I'm Anwar, and I'm your secretary."

"HI, ANWAR!"

He grimaces. "I mean, I'm your *treasurer*!" This guy fucks up *everything*. The group laughs forgivingly as he pops himself in the head with an "I coulda had a V-8" move. Anwar finally laughs, too. "I'm in recovery, alright?"

ANSWER Me!'s TWELVE STEPS

It's not my intention to make fun of people's pain, just their seeming inability to get their shit together without social or spiritual crutches. I consider all of these people better off now than when they were guzzling, snorting, or slamming spikes into their arms. I know firsthand that alcohol is a MOTHERFUCKER. It causes people to lose their inhibitions, and from my experience, I prefer them with their hang-ups. There's nothing I hate more than a grinning drunk leaning in my face. These slobs are said to be responsible for more than half of the fifty thousand or so yearly auto fatalities in the U.S. If one of you stewed creeps ever rams into *my* car, you'd better take me out entirely, because I won't wait for the cops to get there. I'll bash your brains in with a crowbar.

Whew! You know, I feel better. Why don't we all stand up, take a deep breath, and stretch? I'll wait. . . .

OK? This is my main beef: In its wholesale degradation of individuality, the placement of "principles before personalities," the program decapitates the ego when it should be repairing it. A sense of powerlessness and avoiding responsibility is why most of these people became addicts in the first place. Instead of attacking the problem at its source, the program merely substitutes one addiction for another. Call it "positive powerlessness."

There's a distinction between healthy self-reliance and plain bull-headedness which the Twelve-Steppers fail to make. They view the human personality in extremes, both of them lousy. For them, it's either blind defiance or total submission. That's what *ANSWER Me!* calls a "fecal duality"—two shitty choices.

Twelve-Steppers make much of total honesty. If they were truly honest with themselves, they'd admit that when they pray to their "higher power," they're only talking to a mental projection. Their prayers never rise above the ceiling. If anyone wants to tell me with inalienable certainty that they've actually spoken with God, let me point the way to the nearest mental hospital.

The second problem, the need for group support, hinges on the first. The program gives an artificial structure (complete with slogans, communal meetings, and Twelve Commandments) to people who are too weak to structure their own lives. If you form a dependence on others,





you never learn to depend on yourself.

The group is also an unrealistic setting: Unconditional love and acceptance may feel good, but you'll never find it outside of the group's womb. There's a nascent movement called Rational Recovery. It's basically A.A. without the God angle. It doesn't eliminate the need for the group, but at least it gets rid of the higher power. That's a step in the right direction. Only eleven more to go.

"Yeah, Jimbo," you scoff, "you talk that talk, but can you walk that walk? It's easy to criticize, but have *you* ever kicked an addiction? If *you* ever had to go cold turkey, maybe your nuts wouldn't be swinging so low." Alright, asshole, you've twisted my arm. Since I wrote in the Statement of Intent that a journalist who doesn't reveal his background is a liar, you'll have to permit me some psychodrama.

My old man was a brutal alcoholic, the nastiest person I've ever known. His father, whom I never met, was said to be the town drunk of a small backwoods community in Vermont. I tasted the family's legacy of violence early on—my brother tells me that dear ol' dad punched mom in the stomach while she was pregnant with me. My sister says that only days after my newborn body was brought home from the delivery room, dad and one of my brothers got into a fight. An ashtray got smashed into someone's head, and the glass fragments fell into my crib. One of my earliest memories is of watching my sister hunched over the toilet, her mouth drip-drip-dripping blood into the bowl, each drop

dissolved by the clear water. "You see this?" she cried at me. "This is what your father's all about."

I don't know how many times I came home to find the old bastard unconscious, sprawled out like a homicide victim on the living-room floor, in the basement, or in the back alley. When I was five, I watched him trembling as he read a newspaper. "Why are you shaking like that?" I asked, and it blew his mind. Embarrassed that his problem was obvious to a preschooler, he quit drinking.

Three years later, my deaf brother (dad's oldest son of three) was murdered while vacationing in Paris. The old man, perhaps ashamed that his genes had produced an imperfect son, had been especially cruel to him. I suppose dad's guilt was too much to handle. After returning from the funeral for a small gathering at our house, I remember walking into the kitchen to find my father at the table, a half-empty bottle of whisky in front of him.

He started boozing again full-tilt, and since my remaining siblings were married and gone, I became the whipping boy. On one Saturday afternoon when I was nine or ten, I had the misfortune of being home alone with him. Something random enraged him, and he chased me up and down the stairs, through every room in the house, until he caught me. He whacked me several times in the face, finally drawing blood. In my little litigious way, I spit red saliva onto a piece of loose-leaf paper, writing down the date and time of occurrence. I was ready to testify,

because I was certain that my mother would divorce him.

She never did. To this day, she denies that he ever mistreated any of her kids. In fact, when I was about twelve, she egged him on as he lashed at me with his belt for coming home late from school. That beating left zucchini-sized welts up and down my thighs, bruises so extensive that my legs were more purple than pink. The abuse didn't stop until I reached my late teens and decided to hit him back, knocking his ass on the floor and cracking his dentures in half.

He finally kicked his drinking habit on a detox farm, but it was too late. A lifetime of red meat and alcohol had given him colon cancer, and he died within his first year of sobriety. He was a hateful mofo even when sober, but the booze fueled his rage like gasoline on a stove top. Unless you've experienced full-blown alcoholism firsthand, trust me: It's a drunk thing—you wouldn't understand.

Statistics suggest that most alcoholics come from alcoholic families. By the time the old man croaked, I had discovered the fruit of the grape myself, and I was a mean drunk, too. I took to brawling with friends, enemies, strangers, and cops. After downing a fifth of cheap tequila and a quart of Colt 45, I fought with two policemen in suburban Philly. At least that's what *they* told me—I woke up in jail eight hours after the arrest, remembering nothing. I saw myself turning into my father and promptly quit. That was almost ten years ago, and I haven't had so much as a bite of rum cake since.

I continued using drugs, though, mainly weed and acid. The acid experience is redundant and too intense to be addictive, but my weed habit progressed from a weekly to a daily to a five-times-a-day ritual. I toked with zeal throughout most of *ANSWER Me!*'s production phase. (Check out *24 Hours on Sunset* or *Swallowed by Jersey*.) I was spending almost as much on weed as I was on rent. Besides being alarmed that I was smoking all of my discretionary income, I tired of hacking up tarlike gobs of resin and losing my train of thought in mid-sentence. Suffering from an

abundance of self-esteem, I quit. At press time I've been completely sober for two months, and I'll never look back. So *there!*

No one taught me to respect myself. I grew up without role models. I reached inside and found that the higher power was me. Therefore, here are *ANSWER Me!*'s Twelve Steps:

1. We admitted that our addictions were fucking us up.
2. Came to believe that since we started them, only we could stop them.
3. Made a decision to follow our gut instincts *as we understood them*.
4. Didn't bullshit ourselves about our many flaws.
5. Having admitted our flaws, we kept them to ourselves—they're nobody else's business.
6. Were entirely ready to argue with anyone who disagreed.
7. Filled with self-respect, we did nothing humbly.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and realized that most of them deserved it.
9. Paid all our police fines, then burned all our bridges.
10. Continued to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves and admitted all our wrongs—to ourselves.
11. Trusted ourselves and only ourselves with what's best for us.
12. Having assumed full responsibility for our lives, we weren't foolish enough to try to change anyone else—first, it's a losing proposition, and second, we couldn't care less.

What saved me (besides practical considerations) was the act of banishing from my mind the idea that I needed my addictions. That's all. I don't need alcohol, I don't need dope, I don't need others' support, and I sure as fuck don't need a goddamned chip! ■

